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ON THE IDEAL CHARACTER OF THE ISRAELI INTELLIGENCE MAN
AND HIS PROBLEMS - (Interview with Aluf Meir Amit)

by Zeev Shieff, Haaretz - 3.1.1964

The Intelligence Services necessitate secrecy. Their prospects for success increase considerably if they operate secretly. Still, we have now succeeded in lifting somewhat the veil of secrecy for a quick glance as Aluf Amit is now leaving the Army Intelligence Services after having headed it for two years. He is taking off his army uniform but is not returning it because he has formally been loaned by the Army for his new task and also because deep inside he remains an armyman.

Amit is practical and goes straight to the point - he does away with formalities - and wishes to hear my questions:-

Q. In your opinion, how does the Israeli Intelligence Service differ from similar services in other countries?

A. You should bear in mind the fact that Israel does not have great possibilities for physical manoeuvring. This is why we must send out tentacles. The Intelligence increases the Israeli area of deterrence in case of an attack. Our Intelligence therefore exerts greater efforts than in any other country. These efforts would certainly increase in future because modern weapons shorten the time of deterrence.

Q. What is the share of Military Intelligence in the Intelligence Services of the State?

A. Owing to the special situation prevailing - a sort of armed peace and the dangers threatening this peace - the share of the military Intelligence in Israel is especially important.

Until he reached the Intelligence Services, 42 year-old Meir Amit has crossed many stations in Zahal, of which the most important were Commander of the Golani Brigade, Head of the Training Command, O.C. Southern Command at the height of the fedayeen activities and Head of the General Staff Branch during the preparations for the Sinai Campaign. These were purely operative tasks and his arrival therefore at the Intelligence came to many as a surprise. This is why I wish to compare his tasks in the Army.

Q. What period in your military service you deem most important?

A. This is like asking a child if he loves his father or his mother better. Every period was for me a different experience. My period of service as, say, Commander of a battalion, was wonderful and I made use of all my ability. The same applies to the period when I headed a brigade and later on was O.C. Southern Command during the fedayeen activities. No doubt, the Kadesh period was the peak in my activities. My service with the Intelligence was very interesting. This is where I reached the integration of a commander, a staff officer and dealt with subjects having a political significance. ./..

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Q. Much is said now of modern weapons and unconventional wars. Do these leave an impact on Information? Should it too be unconventional?

A. This simply necessitates a scientific approach to Intelligence work. We must adjust ourselves to the progress made by the enemy and even anticipate it. We must always catch up with the enemy. Good Intelligence Services yesterday, do not necessarily guarantee good services tomorrow. We too need scientific development. We must build instruments to allow us localize the new scientific disposition of the enemy. We need more scientists so that we know what to ask. These are problems of special manpower, as many scientists are needed.

Q. How do you see the ideal Israeli Intelligence man?

A. (with a small smile). This is a strange combination comprising a very high intelligence, special experience, freshness of thought added to technical traits, or what we call the certain feeling.

Q. You have come to the Intelligence after having served in operative tasks. You certainly formed a certain opinion on the work of the Intelligence Services. Have you changed your opinion after having headed the Intelligence for two years?

A. I was a client and have become a supplier of material and information. You might say that I was then on the other side of the fence, but I have not changed my views as to what a good Intelligence should be.

Q. Do you think it desirable that men in operative tasks and field commanders, like you and Aluf Mishne Yariv, are transferred to the Intelligence or would it be preferable to maintain this as a purely "professional" field?

A. We have devoted much thought to this question. The tactical Intelligence man could also be a good fighting officer. It is not important either that the heads of the Intelligence are former operative men. It is imperative, however, that the middle layer of Intelligence men should be professional and good.

Two years ago when Mr. Ben Gurion visited the US, he met Amit for a private talk and informed him of his decision to appoint him head of the Intelligence Branch. Amit was then studying business management at the Columbia University. There were rumours in Israel that he intended to leave the army. The late Minister Josephthal offered him to manage the Ministry of Labour, but Amit now claims that he never intended to leave the army. Eighteen months later, when a proposal was raised to appoint Amit as Manager of El Al, Mr. Ben Gurion firmly opposed it and said that many important tasks were yet in store for him.

After being appointed Head of the Intelligence, Aluf Amit sent a long letter to his former assistant and present replacement, A/M Yariv, in which he outlined his overall plan
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for a good Intelligence. This letter reveals his ideas on the Intelligence Services and can also serve as a criterion to gauge the extent to which he managed to implement the plan. Amit then determined three circles: a) the internal Intelligence; b) the Intelligence in the Army and c) the outer, public, circle.

Within the framework of the internal circle, Amit outlined a plan including many points, mostly professional, but mainly based on fostering the Intelligence man as a person who would deem his work a vocation and not merely a means of livelihood. Other items refer to the planning of Information for a long range, the determination of a scale of priority in work and a search for a suitable framework allowing for free contact between the various branches of Intelligence. He especially dwelt on the collective responsibility of all top members of the Intelligence Services.

The second circle, Intelligence in Zahal, was also thoroughly handled during the last two years. Amit then asked in his letter whether the Intelligence has sufficient weight in Zahal as befitted its importance. This is no easy question because in Israel every man, and of course, officers, consider themselves excellent Intelligence men. After being pressed for an answer, Aluf Amit admits that some achievements were made in this field.

As for the outer circle, which includes such institutions as the Foreign Ministry and the Police, Amit says that he has striven for real cooperation. As far as the future is concerned, he remarks that "I do not believe in half measures in Intelligence. Mutual confidence and sincerity are imperative."

"Only part of my plans have been implemented," he says, "and much remains to be done. There is a certain progress but one should bear in mind the fact that there exist no limits to achievements or to what can be done in the Intelligence. On the whole, our Intelligence is good."

Q. It is possible in the Intelligence to examine after a while the estimations on the situation and examine whether they were correct. Did the estimations of the Intelligence prove correct?

A. We were not always one hundred per cent right in chapters out of general good estimations. However, it is not for me to speak favourably of our Intelligence. We are known outside Israel too as possessing good estimations of the situation.

By the way, as many others who share the Defence Budget, Aluf Amit too feels that the allocation to the Intelligence is not sufficient.

An examination of Amit's contribution to Zahal reveals that he no doubt stands in the first row of army Alufim. He sees the Kadesh Operation as the peak of his military career. As a General Staff man he played a considerable role in the operative plans. His task then was that currently imposed on the deputy Chief of Staff - guiding the planning, seeing to the various means and operating the mobilisation of Zahal. He worked under Moshe Dayan whom he describes as "the commander who gave more than any other man. He knew how to let people

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work. Dayan then joined the troops in their advance and I think that he took too great a risk." During the Sinai campaign, Amit was responsible for the command post of the General Staff.

Amit was wounded twice during his service in the army. He was hit by a bullet in his leg during the battle of Goin and was also seriously wounded during a jumping course.

Referring to the battle of El Mutila in 1951, when Zahal lost twenty men and suffered many wounded, Amit sums up the lesson learned by that engagement against the Syrians, by saying, "the Arabs started to recover after the War of Independence and their impudence increased daily. We were in danger of losing the glory achieved in 1948, when the Mutila clash took place. The important thing in Mutila was our stubbornness and refusal to give in notwithstanding the considerable casualties suffered. The simple thing then was to retreat but we did not give in. This was the beginning of the sobering up period which ended in Zahal's attack on the Jordanian village of Falama. For me this was a first lesson on the need to foster constant endurance."

Amit carried this out in practice. He too trained in endurance exercises. In 1953, he attended a course in order to receive the jumping wings and was seriously wounded, again in his left leg. For 16 months he was confined to bed with his whole body encased in plaster. He now admits that he knew then that many doubted whether he would leave his bed at all. He himself felt certain that he would return to the army. He did not waste his time during those 16 months. He studied French, economics, statistics and prepared for studies at the university. He recovered from his wound which, however, is noticeable when he walks. He proceeded for studies in the US on crutches and the paper headlines then read: the courageous do not break down.

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